DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 341 530 RC 018 544

TITLE Early Childhood Education. INAR/NACIE Joint Issues Sessions. National Indian Education Association (NIEA) Annual Conference (22nd, San Diego, California, October 16, 1990).

INSTITUTION Department of Education, Washington, DC. Indian Nations At Risk Task Force.; National Advisory Council on Indian Education, Washington, D.C.

PUB DATE 16 Oct 90

NOTE 11p.; In: The Indian Nations At Risk Task Force and the National Advisory Council on Indian Education Joint Issues Sessions Proceedings. See RC 018 538.

PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS *American Indian Education; American Indians; Ancillary School Services; *Day Care; *Early Childhood Education; Hearings; *Kindergarten; *Language Acquisition; *Parent Participation; Primary Sources; School Readiness

IDENTIFIERS *Project Head Start; School Based Child Care Centers

ABSTRACT

This report summarizes two joint sessions held by the Indian Nations At Risk Task Force and the National Advisory Council on Indian Education to hear testimony on issues in Native American early childhood education. Issues and problems fell into the areas of: (1) Head Start, its funding problems, and its relationship to public and Bureau of Indian Affairs schools; (2) early childhood programs, the need for such programs to prepare preschool children for the increasingly academic demands of kindergarten, culturally biased assessment tests in kindergarten, and de facto segregation among different programs; (3) entrance into kindergarten, school readiness problems, and shortage of kindergarten slots in states where it is not mandatory; (4) increasing education requirements and low salaries for early childhood teachers; (5) parent education, parent advocacy training, and parent participation; (6) financial problems in child care on American Indian reservations; (7) bilingual education issues and promotion of language acquisition and communications skills in young children; and (8) lack of programs for urban American Indians not enrolled in recognized tribes. Recommendations are offered, and exemplary programs are described that involve school-based day care for teen parents and students, preschool programs incorporating Native language and culture, and an urban Indian center that preserves Indian identity among members of 72 tribes. Several pieces of relevant research are noted. (SV)

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INAR/NACIE Joint Issues Sessions
NIEA 22nd Annual Conference - San Diego, California
October 16, 1990

"Early Childhood Education"

RC 018544

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Summary: "Early Childhood Education"

The first session on early childhood education was co-hosted by INAR Task Force member Janine Pease-Windy Boy and NACIE Council member Helen Scheirbeck. The second session on this issue was co-hosted by INAR co-chair William Demmert and NACIE Council member Buck Martin. The following issues, recommendations, and exemplary programs were discussed:

I. **Head Start**

The Success of Head Start

- Head Start is a national preschool program for three- and four-year-olds, with participation limited to families with lower incomes. However, Secretary Sullivan of Health and Human Services has said their goal is to have every child in Head Start, regardless of income. Head Start involves parents in the classroom and allows parents to make decisions. The program encompasses education, social services to support the family, and health, nutrition, and mental health. Ten percent of all children recruited must be handicapped, and these children receive special money and special services. The plan for the next 25 years is to include infants and toddlers, and after school programs for latchkey children.

- Head Start is a well-established program. It has been acclaimed by both political parties and by the governors who regard it as the number one priority for all early education. It is the one program out of the war-on-poverty that has survived and done well because of its success with children, as demonstrated through statistics.

- It is important that national associations support the legislation for Indian Head Start. Currently there are 124 Indian Head Start programs in the United States, and Head Start is one of the most successful programs on reservations. Besides benefitting the children, Head Start has enabled parents to become board members, tribal members, and advocates for their children.

Problems

- Head Start programs on reservations do not correspond to BIA or public schools. Training occurs in both Head Start and in reservation schools in kindergarten and first grade; however, these programs remain isolated from each other. It is difficult not to have these two programs working together. The transition of Head Start students into kindergarten or first grade is not handled very well.

- Indian Head Start programs do not feel as if they are recognized by professional organizations for early childhood.

- There needs to be much better coordination between Head Start, Health and Human Services regional offices, and the U.S. Department of Education. There also needs to be correlation between BIA early education programs and the state programs. In the reviews that I have done, I see Bureau, private, and state schools on the reservation not even talking to each other.

- There are more students who desire to enroll in Head Start than eligible spaces in Juneau, AK.

- Head Start is not meeting our aspirations because of inadequate funding and resources, and a limited availability of services.

Recommendations

- In Santa Barbara County, the Los Ninos Head Start operates under the umbrella of a community action commission. It may be possible for other programs to get under the umbrella of the county superintendent of schools or other organizations to help fund programs.

- We need to find data on the impact of Head Start and develop a tracking system to determine its success. We currently don't have enough data to be able to say a certain percentage of Head Start participants actually graduated from high school and went on to college.

Head Start Personnel

- The need for training parent groups and Indian Head Start staff is tremendous because we do want our local people to constitute the staff of Head Start programs. Salaries are very low, there is turnover, and therefore training needs are great.

- There is not one Indian in any of the jobs in the national Head Start office. Every consultant of the national office is Black, and many have not had any experience out in the field. While I am sure they are sensitive, I hope there would be people who have experience other than in Eastern cities. Without diverse experiences, it would be difficult to understand how Indians operate out in the world.

- Head Start teachers need to have the basic information to be able to help those children that are coming from low income or dysfunctional families, such as those that house alcohol or drug addiction.

- When we hire teachers we need to allow some money for their training needs because it's impossible for them to get other help. If they are not going to school full-time and taking 12 credits, they are not eligible for financial aid. If no money is provided in Head Start for training, then we are not going to have teachers equipped to work with the students and their parents.

II. Early Childhood Programs

Recognition of the Need

- National Indian organizations--National Congress of American Indians, National Tribal Chairman's Association, National Indian Education Association--have not espoused early education. There is very little discussion of early education at any of their conferences, including this one. This issue needs to be addressed.

- The National Association of Early Education is the only organization that addressed the issue of Indian early childhood education. Each year at their annual conference they hold an Indian caucus, and host several presentations on Indian children.

- We are experiencing younger and younger parents--kids themselves who are having children. In one of our HUD housing centers, there are almost 99 percent single mothers with many, many small children in the area.

Problems

- It is a struggle for learning centers to provide culturally-based curriculum because there is so little available. Red Lake considers their day care as a learning center, not a babysitting service. We read to children, introduce the alphabet and the numbers, and do many activities to prepare them for Head Start. However, we are having trouble finding curriculum for the children. I just learned of a book company in Boston that focuses on books for people of color and hope to find materials there. The curriculum for Head Start is too advanced for our two- and three-year-olds, but we believe we must start teaching children at this age and not wait until Head Start.

- Schools are pushing kids faster than they are developmentally prepared to progress. It is not appropriate to expect kids to know certain things before they enter kindergarten. As a result, we have an increasing number of junior first classes comprised of kids that went through kindergarten and couldn't do all of the work. They are placed in a pre-first grade class because they weren't developmentally ready, and are consequently being labeled as special education kids.

- Assessment tests are culturally biased. They don't take into account the personality of a child, their cultural background, or the learning styles of the child. Those who fit into the mainstream do fine, but those who don't are going to be separated more and more as they are put into a junior first class and labeled as developmentally slow.

- In Juneau, AK there is a concern that different early education programs begin to segregate kids. Rich families send their children to Montessori schools; low income people send their kids to Head Start; and, Native people send their children to JOM programs, regardless of income levels. There is no intermingling of the groups. There is a feeling that we need to provide more opportunity for the students to mix together so later on when they're in public education they will have had the earlier experiences of being together. In Juneau we are trying to figure out ways to do that among ourselves. We're considering an exchange program with our staff, or visitation program in which the students go on field trips to other schools.

Recommendations

- We need to offer children a lot of opportunities to create artwork and play with shapes. Just as children have to be allowed to play with language and sound to allow the brain to develop and distinguish different sounds and words. Before they are forced to learn letters, they need to understand what a combination of "squiggles" mean.

- The Montessori model of a prepared environment could bring both the child's Native culture and the dominant culture into a day care program.

- All children, including Native American children, tend to grow along similar developmental patterns. Therefore it is necessary that people to be aware of the developmental activities that children perform at different ages. When Head Start was first established, the teachers treated the students as if they were older and consequently didn't give them a lot of hands-on

activities. Interaction should be different for two- and three-year-olds than for five- and six-year-olds.

- We need an environment rich with manipulative activities and staff trained in observing children and noting their interests so we can discover learning preferences and styles of the children.

- Rich Indian cultural activities are some of the best activities for children. Research shows that children need a lot of development of eye, brain, and hand manipulation, and all of that is encompassed in our cultural craftwork. Furthermore, being active in traditional activities provides a place for socialization.

Exemplary Programs

- Red Lake Reservation in Minnesota has the largest Indian school in the state. We have an in-school day care as a major service to keep the teen parents in school. Our day care serves mostly infants and toddlers, with our three- and four-year-olds spending part of the day at the reservation Head Start. We are licensed by the State of Minnesota which enables us to receive county monies for reimbursement. Consequently, we have some really strict guidelines that we must follow which is a real struggle for us because the local community is not trained in early childhood education.

  Any teen parent that brings their child to the day care is required to take two classes and be in the day care center three times a day. (1) They have to be in a lab class which is essentially taking care of day care responsibilities such as helping out with chores and running the day care. This is a credit course that counts towards graduation. We are currently developing a curriculum to work toward an outcome-based mastery of parenting skills based upon early childhood guidelines. (2) They spend time with their children, and are required to feed them at lunch. (3) They attend an actual parenting class. This is a regular academic class where they receive instruction in mental health, physical health, career, and living skills.

  The students who use the day care are about 95 percent mothers, and five percent fathers. We have a growing number of teen fathers in the program because we now have a three-year grant to have a teen father counselor who is working specifically with the dads to help them stay in school and help them decide where they are going to go after graduation.

  We have developed our own curriculum that teaches Ojibwa numbers, alphabet, animals, and other basic items. Our day care uses both English and Ojibwa. We also have a grandparents program to bring the Elders into the day care to help out. One of their purposes is to speak Ojibwa.

- During the time that INAR Co-Chair William Demmert was Commissioner of Education in the State of Alaska, Governor Cooper granted a budget increase from $4 million to $12 million for early childhood education. For a small state, that increase is significant. There are no records yet of the successful effects, but there are records across the United States that tell us early childhood education is a very important focus.

- In Oklahoma City there is a medical school that has a preschool program. The director of the program provides the children with Indian culture in the classroom and creates a sense of interest, excitement, and understanding. As part of teaching the culture, the teacher took the kids to a nearby reservation. It is important to have funds available to take children out of

the classroom. First their attention is focused in the classroom and then they are prepared to take in the experience outside of the class.

III. Entrance into Kindergarten

Problems

- Children are being subjected to admissions tests to get into kindergarten. Particularly if schools are pressured space-wise, they are looking for ways to weed out a few students. Schools are setting required competencies to enter kindergarten that are much too high for most of our Indian children who have not had experiences expected of them. The schools need to look very carefully at that because requirements are not based on appropriate developmental levels of children.

- At the Crow Reservation they count the children in Head Start to inform the schools how many children will be enrolling in kindergarten. However, the school does not respond to these notifications. One particular year the school was prepared for a kindergarten class of 35, but there were 50 kids ready to attend. There was a tremendous delay for 15 students who waited one whole year to go to school.

- There is a correlation between children who are two or three years older than their class and dropping out. Some of the complication begins to happen in the gap between Head Start and the lack of receptiveness at the kindergarten level. This is further compounded by the fact that in many states kindergarten is not a part of the system, or it is an optional program.

Recommendations

- An active parent-teacher association could help mend some of the problems of readiness assessment. Santa Barbara County teachers refused to administer the left-brain dominant readiness assessment and met together in the evening to construct their own test. We need to encourage local government and local authority (parents) to join with the teachers to determine what readiness is.

- In Juneau, AK, all kids who are five-years-old by August 15 are entitled to enroll in kindergarten, and the school district is required to find room for them. The schools sometimes must hire additional staff and search out places to hold the kindergartens. The only problem with this system is that some children miss the cutoff date for admission by only a few days. If the parents feel they are old enough to attend school, the children must go through some rigorous testing in order to get in.

IV. Early Childhood Educators

Teacher Training

- Some Indian community colleges do have Indian early education programs. I would encourage community colleges to beef up their early education programs and provide child development associate (CDA) programs so that people can get a certificate. Many people will never go to college, but a CDA says that they are competent child caregivers.

- CDA requirements are changing and will be harder for local people to meet because they now require more postsecondary classes as opposed to just inservice training. For example, training on the Red Lake Reservation is an issue because in order for their staff to get trained, they have to drive 30 plus miles to get to Bemidji to take classes. This is particularly difficult to do in the long Minnesota winters.

Problems with Teacher Salaries

- The pay scale of child care workers is horrendous. We have a 41 percent turnover rate in our program every year because the pay scale is so low. Teachers know they are better off on welfare than they are working because teachers make only $7,000 - $8,000 a year. This salary puts them right above the welfare line and thus ineligible for assistance. If they have three children to support, it is impossible for them to make ends meet.

- Because there is a strong commitment towards early childhood programs, when they are first established, organizations and administrators who run the programs take advantage of that commitment and the salaries are not commensurate with the value of the employees.

- There is a battle in Alaska between Health and Social Services and educators about where financial support for those programs ought to originate. If it comes through Health and Social Services, the salaries will continue to be low. If it comes through education, the teachers' union will force those salaries up and they'll be consistent with teachers' salaries across the state. We have a mixture of the two kinds of programs in Alaska that supports this statement: programs started by schools have salaries that are consistent with teachers' salaries, while programs tied to Health and Social Service activities have salaries that continue to be consistently low.

V. The Role of Parents

Parental Training

- Parents need training in advocacy. They need to know how to help their children throughout their entire school career and that they have a voice and a right to talk about what's needed for their children. They should be trained in early education so they can be better parents.

- We need a school-based parenting curriculum. Currently there are only six- or eight-week programs geared toward people not in school. Red Lake requires a parenting class for graduation, but it is set for someone who comes in for two hours a night, once a week for eight weeks.

Parental Involvement

- The parent-teacher partnership is very critical. I suggest appointing a parent representative so that the dialogue with schools continues to be rich.

- Indian parents should have the opportunity to determine the values from both the dominant culture and from their Indian culture that they want to be part of the curriculum.

VI. Financing Early Childhood Programs

Problems

- Starting a day care center presents a financial struggle because most reservation facilities are usually quite old. Red Lake spent $30,000 renovating its facility in order to make it acceptable for parents and for licensing standards. We spent $30,000 up front to make the facility fire and health safe, as well as acquiring curriculum materials and beds. In addition to the initial expense, the school board is putting out $50,000 of its own money every year to support it. It is very costly but it has proven to be a successful way to keep teens in school. It is successful in the long run because it lowers the dropout rate.

- The new child care legislation may go through Title XX for child care funding if doesn't go to the Department of Education. If this is the case, funding will not reach Indian programs because Title XX usually does not go to reservations.

Recommendations

- The new child care bill could make it difficult for Indian programs to get any money from states. In California they are systematically closing Indian programs throughout the state. I would suggest a set-aside for Indian programs in the child care bill.

- When there is not enough money to go around, we need to work very carefully on doing things cooperatively to bring them to a higher level.

VII. Language Acquisition

How Language is Acquired and Recommendations for Schools

- Linguists know that the acquisition of the first language is experiential and happens at the subconscious level called the creative construction. This has to happen in some freedom and the environment has to be rich with language. I think we are going to need video and audio material to accompany children to prepared environments so that the children can see their culture and hear their language. You've got to put it in the environment and sensitize the staff to the importance of having the language and culture in the classroom. This should be authentic culture penetrating into the classroom.

- Youngsters need an opportunity to listen to a language. They need time to just absorb the language and we shouldn't force them to be talking all the time.

- Literacy implies the ability to communicate verbally and express ideas in the correct written form. On the other hand, language acquisition is a natural process in which we learn to speak. We hear it all of the time and suddenly we begin to speak when at a subconscious level the brain begins to make meaning out of sounds. Children just start speaking and we should not inhibit the process. We tend to assist them consciously, but it's a subconscious process.

- We can begin to provide non-threatening ways for children to explore and play with the symbols of the written language. If we allow them to follow their own process, and have a trained observing teacher and plenty of materials, children will put the written language together for themselves, just as they do verbally.

- Traditionally Native Americans have had only oral tradition. However, a whole system of literacy actually exists because literacy includes far more than the recordation of words. From the time babies are infants, they read people's faces, sounds, and surroundings. Even before they can verbalize, children are learning the notion of literacy. Consequently, the kind of verbal interaction adults have with children directly relates to their ability to become readers.

- Traditionally children were trained by grandparents, aunts, and uncles as a part of a traditional formal system for education. That training started as soon as a youngster learned to walk. However, we do not do this anymore; we have given up that responsibility to schools and churches. As practitioners in local communities, we need to consider picking up some of those earlier practices.

- Because there is a need for parents to work, children are being taken for schooling earlier. This makes the whole issue of language quite critical, especially if there is a desire to maintain the Native language. Culture and tradition are passed through the language, and caregivers are only able to transmit these values if they speak the language. Certainly this is easier to accomplish on the reservation than it is in mixed groups. Nonetheless, decisions need to be made about what we expect from caregivers.

- There should be linguistic consultants in local programs to bring these ideas to the staff and the recommend materials.

<u>The Importance of Developing a Language Base for Other Learning</u>

- Early childhood education is very important because at a very early age we establish a language base from which to learn. Establishing that language base is absolutely central to providing an opportunity for young Indian and Alaskan Native children to achieve and succeed in school. A language base is the key to developing other skills and intelligence necessary for success.

- There is value in learning a language early, especially for Indian or Native Alaskan communities that are interested in developing or strengthening the Native language base. Furthermore, a language base can be used for learning other languages, whether it is the Native language, English, or another foreign language. This is something we've stopped doing in Indian communities where many of our grandparents were bilingual.

- It is possible for youngsters to learn more than one language simultaneously and understand the difference between the two languages. They may mix the two, but that doesn't mean they don't understand them. When pushed, children can demonstrate that they understand there are two different languages.

- It is important to continue developing the first language as children move towards other languages. If you limit that development, you begin to limit the ability to develop the second language.

VIII. Urban Issues

- There are no programs available for urban Indians. The Indian Head Start money goes to reservations and it does not go to urban areas for Indian children. Furthermore, Indian children and families do not usually participate in urban programs run by the region. Either

they don't know about the programs because the recruiting isn't right, or they don't stay in programs because they don't feel wanted.

- Indian children who are unaffiliated with a tribe are being denied services. We need unaffiliated Indian early childhood education monies available because currently we are recognized as Indians on the state level, but because we are not affiliated with a tribe, we are not granted federal status.

- The Santa Barbara Urban Indian Center serves 72 tribes in the area which were losing their sense of Indian identity. There is a big challenge in urban ares to house a variety of families and still create a sense of "Indianness." We can't expect people to identify themselves as Indians if we don't have anything in the urban areas that gives them a reason to identify as Indian. The Santa Barbara Urban Indian Center is having a mini powwow to attract families.

IX. Available Research

- The report of the Silver Panel for Head Start's 25th year covers the last 25 years and plans for the next 25 years. Head Start will include a day care to include infants and toddlers. It will also be linking with other agencies and do wraparound programs.

- A report done by the BIA with Bank Street college in 1978 describes the needs of young Indian children, age zero to eight, on 27 reservations. Their recommendations are just as good today as they were then. They suggested restructuring the BIA schools so that the greatest emphasis would be placed on children from prenatal through third grade, or eight years of age. By giving students everything they needed up until this age, when the students reached fourth grade, they could fly pretty well on their own.

- Governor Cooper of Alaska authorized a major report on early childhood education and parenting. This is an excellent piece that is a good source for people looking for additional information on the topic. This is a product of the Governor's Task Force on Early Childhood Education and was published through the U.S. Department of Education.

- The U.S. Department of Education put together a small piece on an early childhood education plan for the State of Alaska. That is available through the ERIC system.

- The National Association of Early Childhood Education has published research on Indian early childhood education in their magazine.